



GLASS CLASS

FOUR HOURS WITH KNOXVILLE'S

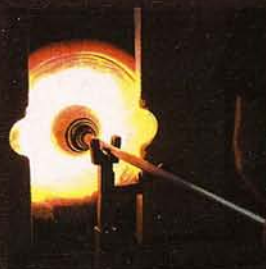
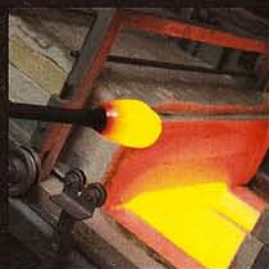
R I C H A R D



FOR JOLLEY, **ART IS HOT**
& HEAVY WORK. HE STARTS FORMING A
PIECE OF GLASS ART AT AROUND 2,000
DEGREES, AND BEFORE ALL IS SAID AND
DONE, A PIECE CAN WEIGH UPWARDS OF
60 POUNDS. WORSE, THE METAL POLE
THE GLASS IS FORMED ON IS LONG AND
AWKWARD, LIKE A BIG HOT COTTON SWAB.
IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO WORK UP A
SWEAT. BLOWING GLASS IS AEROBIC. BUT
AMIDST THE GRUNT AND SQUALOR OF THE
JOB, **JOLLEY CHOREOGRAPHS**
A DANCE. HE AND HIS FOUR ASSIS-
TANTS MOVE TOGETHER EFFORTLESSLY,
HANDLING THE HOT BALL OF GLASS WITH
CARE AND GRACE. FOR RICHARD JOLLEY,
G L A S S I S A R T .

MOST HERALDED ARTIST
J O L L E Y

BY J. BRANDON LOWE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL WALDORF



RICHARD JOLLEY IS A GENUINE INTELLECTUAL.

In the mid-90s, he made an unconscious decision to continue to create art. At the time, Jolley, had been working on his "Totem Series," which went on to earn him international notoriety. From 1994 to 2001, he created work in the form of busts and torsos. The series evolved and Jolley began to make large, brightly colored pieces of art with his cutting edge glass molding technique. At that point, Jolley could have just kept making more and more totems, and in the process, more and more money. He "could" have.

What he did instead was continue to innovate. In his "Mixed-Media Constructions" and "Tabula Rasa" series, Jolley evolved his media, selecting new materials, like metal and wood, and new themes, like birds and plants.

Today, he continues to innovate, morphing forms with hand tools and sculpture spatulas at anywhere between 1300 and 1800 degrees, all the while pushing the limits of what traditionalists say you can do with glass.

Richard is genuine in his commitment to grow as an artist. And the intellectual and emotional quality he gives to his glasswork is matched only by the precision with which he and his team of apprentices construct it.

Maybe even more amazing is the process of blowing the glass. Jolley, with the help of four assistants, handles the glass with care, as a unit, through a meticulous process. And though Jolly has help, he never strays far from the project, heeding attention to every detail.

When the City View crew visited his studio in West Knoxville, we were amazed at how well coordinated Jolley and his crew were even though most

of the communication is non-verbal, the mark of a team who has not only done this many times before but one who truly enjoys what they do.

Soon, the ball of glass grows and begins to take on human features. Using a spatula, Jolley makes an eyebrow and a nose, slowly forming the bulbous core into an image of a man. The process resembles a pastry chef putting icing on a cake. The incredible temperatures of Jolley's kilns and hand torches make the glass malleable. He uses spot heat to model the parts; constantly heating with the torch just to ensure it doesn't break from the rod. One slip could cost them the whole project.

We all stood quietly in awe. Jolley's composure is impressive. And why shouldn't it be, he invented some of these techniques, working for over 30 years to perfect them. And he's done it all, right here in Knoxville.



EXPLAIN THE BASIC PROCESS OF CREATING GLASS ART?

We start by shaping the core into the basic form and then we build our surfaces by adding more material to get to the final result. It's like modeling wax or clay or bread dough, only you can't touch it because of the extreme heat.

WHAT'S INVOLVED IN GETTING READY?

There is a lot of preparation involved. To start with, we spend half a day mixing the glass from the raw materials. Then, we add metallic oxides to make the colors. Plus, it takes a day to melt. So, before we even start the work we already have a day and a half of time involved.

HOW MUCH EQUIPMENT IS REQUIRED?

There is a fair amount of equipment. The glass is melted in the furnace, reheated as it is worked on in a second furnace called a Glory Hole, which is really just a funny name for reheating

furnance. Finally annealed in a third furnace which slowly cools the glass to avoid stress fractures. The other tools consist of blowpipes, punty, marver, blocks, jacks, paddles, tweezers and a variety of shears. Most of the tools are fairly low tech, and yet sophisticated.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE REQUIRED?

We've got a team of four additional people working on the piece today. The more complex the piece the more sets of hands you need to make the process practical.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS USED APPRENTICES?

Through the years we've had assistants here and there. I feel very lucky right now. All of the guys that are working with me are working at a high level and they come wanting to do well and giving their best. We've got some really good chemistry working in the studio. I think that's one of the exciting things

about working with a group of people. I like the dynamics.

IN WHAT OTHER WAYS TO YOU TRAIN YOU APPRENTICES?

The arts lack a lot of the mentoring that a lot of other businesses have. As well as helping me as an artist, we also nurture them as artists and get them involved with things like "Artscapes," the art auction at the Knoxville Museum of Art. And the advantage is that I don't have to concentrate as much on them and so I am able to concentrate on the total piece. So hopefully it's a win-win situation.

WHY DO YOU BLOW THE GLASS INSTEAD OF MAKING SOLID PIECES?

If we were to make this piece and it was solid glass, it would probably end up being about 45-50 pounds, by blowing it, it will be about 20-25 pounds. In about 1989, all of my sculptural work was solid, so I didn't blow glass for



about 10-15 years. And now I do it both ways. Some pieces are solid and some pieces are blown. You'll see as we are working on this piece that for two plus hours of work, the total blowing of the piece will be less than two minutes. Yes, it has breath in it, but it's not the most important part of the forming process.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT YOUR PROCESS THAN TRADITIONAL GLASS BLOWING?

The glass process that I use is a start to finish process. I think that most people think of blowing glass as making goblets where somebody takes a little blob of glass and drops it in a mold, and then it's either hand stemmed or factory stemmed, broken off, then a machine scores it and sears it. We're sort of on the other side of the industrial revolution, where there is still a lot of hand-work. So, you develop these techniques to compensate for what you should not be doing with glass.

WHAT ARE YOUR INNOVATIONS?

Basically, what we are doing is pushing the envelope of technique. I can do things today I couldn't do say 15 or 20 years ago. So, one of the things I try to do for myself is sort of push the window and try to develop my skill levels. Glass the way we form it, it's a very physical process. And I do think that with certain materials certain stylizations occur. But I think things are truly limited mostly by an artist's vision. I hate to chest beat and say I invented the universe. There are limitations that everyone puts on themselves. And I think that to try to transcend limitations is part of the goal of artists. An artist's job is to make the complex look simple.

GLASS SEEMS LIKE AN UNUSUAL CHOICE OF MEDIUMS?

I like to look at glass as a non-traditional material for making sculpture. Very much like Duane Hanson used plastics in his work. It's funny how in certain time periods different materials are viewed in certain hierarchical issues. It's all a matter of sophistication. Everything has a physical principle. I really don't approach glass as a designer craftsman; I approach it as an artist maker.

YOUR ART IS SO LIFELIKE, HOW DO YOU CREATE THAT ILLUSION?

I try to infuse a personality into the pieces. I don't necessarily think about it like this guy's going to be mean and hateful or this guy is going to be nice and happy. But I think as I work on pieces, from one series to another, I'm trying to create a personality. And you try to infuse it with a body gesture or slight turn of the head that sort of gives it a personal characteristic. I try to make each piece look individual instead of having a rigid design.



WHY DO YOU PREFER GLASS?

Well, there are both technical and aesthetic reasons to use glass. I think part of it is that as a student I was introduced to glass. The studio glass movement that was spawned in the collegiate system started in the early 1960s. I was introduced to it in 1971.

WHAT FUELED YOUR DESIRE TO BE AN ARTIST?

I was part of the Vietnam generation and the protest generation. So, you didn't want to be corporate. You wanted to find something that was productive. I didn't want to be an anarchist, though. So, I think, for me, that the only alternative to being a productive member of society is to be an artist. And as I generally say about glass, I started and didn't know enough to stop.

DID LEARNING ABOUT GLASS JUST COME NATURALLY?

I think you intuitively know that certain things that you do, you have a capacity of possibly becoming very competent at. And I think that one of the reasons I make a lot of my work out of glass is that I've become very skilled at it. So I can be very articulate using

it as a material. I use glass maquettes for bronzes whereas most people use wood, wax or clay. Not that I don't enjoy painting or drawing. One of the pure joys of being an artist is learning about materials and problem solving. It's enjoyable to figure out how to make certain things to articulate what you do.

WHAT FACINATES YOU ABOUT GLASS?

The average person thinks about glass as a plate glass window; if you drop it, it breaks. I think the fascinating thing about glass is that its sort of instantaneous. So, there's that appeal. But also you are able to coordinate the eye and the hand. So with sculpting you make a decision, you do something, you make a decision, and you do something. It's very consuming as an actual process.

WHY THE HUMAN FORM AS A SUBJECT?

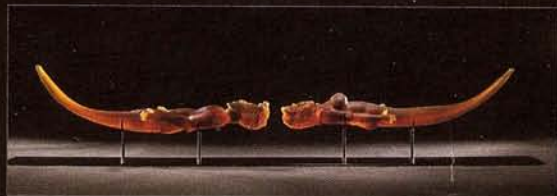
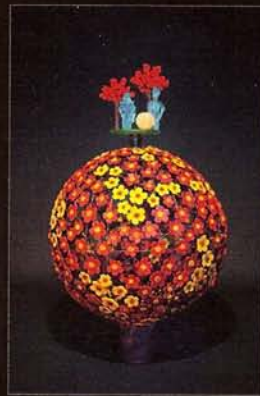
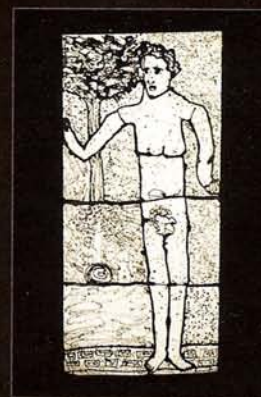
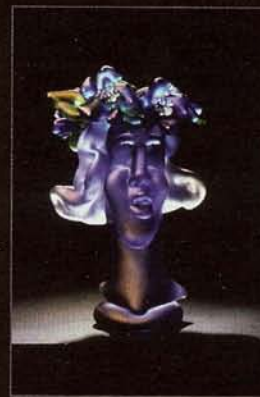
I think that as humans we really haven't evolved that much as far as form goes, and in terms of the making process of glass, the human figure is one of the most complex to make and therefore it's the most challenging to articulate. You take this inanimate, oozing object, and make something that

looks feminine. It's just really an unobtainable concept on one level. We are always trying to define who we are, and where we are in the universe. For myself, the figurative bit was much more interesting. Also, I think that all work is somewhat autobiographical, with a little veiling.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

We have projects in the studio we've been working on since January of 2007. I sort of work on multiple projects simultaneously. It's not quite as linear as it used to be. But I think that right now I am just ready to kick it into high gear, if you wish. I think it's interesting to be concerned with nuance. And so I think that is one of the things that drew me to work in a series. I work on two to three series at a time. The Garden Series started out with me wanting the work to be light hearted, having the human figure and botanical nature tied together. There is a subtle part of the series that tangent out into my new work, which includes wall pieces and smaller 3-D works that combine several types of media. Like metal with glass, for example.

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SO, YOUR BEST WORK IS AHEAD OF YOU?

I sort of have a simple concept that as an artist you come into your own in your 50s, if you live in a non-major metropolitan area. I look to the lion years where you have the experience and hopefully the physical ability before you break down. I think that most artists live in the future.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PIECE OF YOUR OWN WORK?

I think that as far as appreciating your work you don't really have a favorite. Your favorite is really what you are working on in the present. If you sat three pieces out I'd probably say I like this one and then another time I'd like this one. So, it's sort of evocative. I think when you are working you try to infuse some universal quality and hopefully it will transcend and continue year after year and there will be a sort of integrity of intent, if you wish.

HOW DID YOU REACH THIS POINT?

A lot of it is experience. I think when you're young you worry. But, really, overall, it's just a level of concentration you have to develop. Being at your prime, you have absorbed a lot of

things so they become intuitive. You are carrying one thing and moving to the future at the same time. Hopefully it's the essence or the verbiage of the work that's important, not necessarily that they are made with technical virtuosity. I think artists like to function under the assumption that they are geniuses but they don't tell you they have worked at it for 30 years.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU IN ART?

I always try to educate myself when I travel to look at art. And so, we went to Prague and went to art museums and when we went to Turkey we saw lots of art. Early on I was interested in early modernism. I have a lot of artists I view as favorites. Really, I think it's just a constant change.

WHY KNOXVILLE?

I think there are multiple reasons for staying in Knoxville. Coming out of school, when I decided to be an artist, I wanted to try and do it without having to go to New York. Don't get me wrong, I show in New York and enjoy New York. But I think you are able to have a larger studio in this area and you are better able to execute your work. One of the

things I like about East Tennessee is that everybody respects your privacy. It's a real city. It's got real nuts and bolts. It has real people. And I think that makes it an interesting city as opposed to a highly touristy city. I think some artists have to go to non-profit spaces to execute major commissions. And I have the capacity to do that here in Knoxville. I have accumulated the ability to do big projects here.

WHAT IS YOUR WIFE'S ROLE IN YOUR ART?

For one, she herself is an accomplished artist. I think there are a lot of levels people help you. If you want a critique of your work, though, you want it from someone you trust. The further along you get, you have two types of comments. They are either completely flattering or completely insulting. It's very kind for people to compliment you, but if you don't know their aesthetics, it's hard to gauge their opinion. So, she helps me problem solve. She has done a tremendous amount of work other than the making of the art. She is a fabulous proofreader and editor, whereas I'm dyslexic. Actually, the truth is, she's the one who really helped make me famous. ☺